

Young and vulnerable: meeting the challenge of youth employment

Young men and women make up the most vulnerable segment of the labour market. Trapped in low paid, precarious and even dangerous work, they face growing inequality, insecurity and exclusion. What should the trade union response be to the challenge of youth employment?

Global youth unemployment is high and rising. The ILO estimates that 88 million young people throughout the world are unemployed. Over the last decade, the number of young people seeking employment has been increasing. In 1993, the global youth unemployment rate was 11.7 per cent. Today it has reached 14.4 per cent. In many countries women are far more likely to be unemployed than men. Joblessness is high in countries with a large youth population. In the Middle East and North Africa, there is an acute problem with 26 per cent of young people unemployed. In Sub-Saharan Africa the figure is 21 per cent.

Although youth unemployment across the world is alarmingly high, the figures themselves say little about the nature of work for young people. For many young people the problem is as much underemployment as unemployment. Young people make up the bulk of the world's working poor. The ILO estimates that 130 million young people earn less than one US\$ per day, though the United Nations World Youth Report (2003) calculates a far higher figure of 238 million.

The vast majority of young people are in the informal economy where they work unacceptably long hours in jobs which are often low paid and poor quality. In Africa, 93% of all new jobs are in such unprotected work. In Latin America, wages in the informal economy are at best half of those in the formal economy.

Tens of millions of children are forced to work instead of going to school. An estimated 246 million children work as child labourers. They certainly fall into



Photo: ILO

low quality jobs when becoming young adults. UNICEF estimates that nearly 70 per cent work in dangerous conditions – in mines, with chemicals or heavy machinery. Girls working as domestic servants, like the *restavèks* in Haiti, are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and beatings from their employers. Children are regularly trafficked, forced into debt bondage and prostitution. India still has the largest number of child workers in the world. Sixty million children work as agricultural workers, domestic servants, textile workers and stone breakers.

Young people are far more likely than

their older colleagues to be exposed to a lack of social and legal protection. Their access to freedom of association and collective bargaining is severely compromised. Employed on short term contracts or with no contracts at all, most leave their protection behind at the factory gates. Millions of young people in the developed and developing world are trapped in temporary and part time jobs. In Europe, young Italians, French and Swedes face rates of involuntary part time work of over 50 per cent.

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Young women especially carry the burden of the insecure labour market, confronting widespread discrimination in education and jobs. Poverty and prejudice robs many girls of the opportunity for a primary education. HIV and AIDS is having a devastating impact on school enrolment as children have to accept the dirtiest and most dangerous work to maintain their family's survival.

Meeting the challenge of creating decent work for young people requires a range of policy reforms and interventions. There is no "one size fits all" approach. The cure-all dogma of flexibility has not delivered on job creation and decent work. Its expression in structural adjustment programmes in developing countries has led to the promotion of the informal economy, the dismantlement of public sector jobs and essential public services, and has exacerbated poverty and income inequality.

Policy reforms need to be based on a wide range of macroeconomic and micro-level responses to promote growth and employment prospects for young people. The Conclusions of the ILO Tripartite Meeting on Youth Employment, held in Geneva in October 2004, present a checklist of interventions for national level action to improve the employment prospects of young people. Supported by trade unions, the proposals combine policies and programmes designed to make decent and productive employment a key priority based on national circumstances and include:

- access to universal, free, quality public primary and secondary education and investment in vocational training and lifelong learning.
- targeted initiatives and incentive schemes to raise labour demand for

young people, especially disadvantaged youth.

- recognition of the right of young workers to Decent Work (including its four dimensions: fundamental workers' rights, quality jobs, social protection and social dialogue).
- entrepreneurship and productive and sustainable self-employment as sources of decent employment for young people.
- employment services, guidance and careers advice such as labour market information and career counselling.
- wage policies that ensure that young people receive fair and adequate incomes for productive work, and policies that promote freedom of association, collective bargaining and safe and secure working conditions.
- strengthening existing networks of young entrepreneurs (as well as cooperatives) and young trade unionists around the world.

TRADE UNION ACTION

Youth employment has become a policy priority and an agenda for action for trade unions. At international level, in dealings with the international financial institutions, the ICFTU and the global unions emphasise the recommendations of the ILO World Commission Report on the Social Dimension of Globalisation and the report's focus on decent work. At national and regional level, trade unions, working with governments and employers, are advocating strategies for fostering economic growth and quality youth employment.

Many more trade unions could tackle the challenge of decent work by drawing on the evidence of good practice that abounds. The few examples below illustrate the breadth of trade union action

that is possible in just four areas: employability, employment information, job creation and legal protection.

Employability – whether campaigning for free quality primary education or themselves teaching basic skills, trade unions are helping children and adults develop the skills for work. In Burkina Faso, a trade union centre teaches literacy to girls whose families cannot afford to send them to school. In the United Kingdom the TUC runs a network of Bargaining for Skills projects which help trade unions negotiate for training and lifelong learning in the workplace.

Employment information – working with the social partners, trade unions are involved in the development of effective programmes for linking job-seekers to the labour market. In Israel the workers' confederation HISTADRUT makes sure that a trade union secretary, in every school that works under the Apprenticeship Law, gives students information about their rights in employment.

In Singapore the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) set up Job Link Centre in 2002 to act as a one-stop job placement centre with counselling and training for jobseekers, website links to referrals and a network of 1,000 unionised employers. The NTUC also acts as the secretariat to the National Skills Redevelopment Programme and runs Place-and-Train and Train-and-Place programmes.

Job creation – in Brazil the three trade union centres have been working with President Lula's government on *Primeiro Emprego*, the national action plan on youth employment, which aims to create 260,000 jobs for youths aged 16 to 24, and to provide 600,000 with training and assistance in setting up micro-businesses.

The Euro-Mediterranean Youth Trade Union Network (EMYTUN), a network of young workers from different countries, has recently launched a campaign on youth employment. The campaign aims to generate awareness of the need to create job opportunities for young people living in the Euro-Med region.

Legal protection – the bread and butter of trade unions' work, the labour movement has responded to the challenge of youth employment by campaigning for stronger protection for young workers, including those working in the informal economy. In Hong Kong the national centre is pressing for legislative changes to provide protection for part time and temporary workers. The Australian Council of Trade Unions is running "Call Central", a campaign that aims to ensure that the growing call centre sector, mainly employing young people, adheres to the principles of quality employment. ●

Key statistics

- One person in five in the world is aged between 15 and 24. Eighty-five per cent of these young people live in developing countries.
- Eighty-eight million young people are unemployed and about 75 million of these are living in the developing world.
- Youth unemployment rates are highest in the Middle East and North Africa (26%) and Sub Saharan Africa (21%).
- Young people are over three times more likely to be unemployed than adults.
- Many young people are underemployed. There are an estimated 130 million young people working on less than US\$ 1 per day.
- Over the last decade, the youth population expanded in Africa by over 35% and by over 20% in South Asia. The youth share of the working-age population in these countries also increased dramatically.

Sources: ILO, Global Employment Trends for Youth, 2004; ILO, Facts on Youth Employment

Organising young workers around the world

Evidence from around the world shows that many trade unions have taken radical steps to address the chronic decline of union membership. Many more could learn from the different approaches trade unions use to entice young people into joining trade unions.

Greek union COSMOTE managed to triple the membership in call centres in 2002 thanks to a dynamic recruitment drive led by young women trade unionists. COSMOTE, an affiliate of global union UNI, convinced the largely female staff in the call centres to join the union after it had negotiated a series of successes in maternity and family rights.

COSMOTE is just one example of a growing trend by trade unions to reassert trade union power and influence by increasing membership, building effective workplace organisation, and strengthening collective bargaining. Stung into action in the 1990s by falling membership, many trade unions have shifted their culture and resources towards organising new workers and reviving traditional strengths, such as political links and collective bargaining.

Many trade unions have explicitly targeted young people in their efforts. Trade unions are often perceived as irrelevant or old-fashioned to young people starting out in the labour market. Many young people do not work in sectors of traditional union strength. They may be unemployed or underemployed, or working in industries where jobs are insecure and poorly paid – typically out of the reach of the labour movement.

Young people have often been at the vanguard of efforts to turn the tide and regenerate union membership. Working as youth officers within their trade unions, directly recruited as union organisers, or working as union representatives to revive union branches, young labour activists are using their experience and understanding of their own generation to pull more young people into membership.

ORGANISING SCHOOLS

Trade union national centres in industrialised economies have set up “organising schools” – training centres which teach young people the skills to recruit workers in newly established

workplaces and strengthen union influence in traditional sectors. Courses vary in length and focus from the three-week summer schools run by the Canadian Labour Congress through its Solidarity Works! programme to the one year’s training in the Organising Academy, run by the British Trades Union Congress.

Trade union leaders often attribute a revival in union strength and an upward trend in new recognition agreements to the success of their organising schools, whilst also recognising the contribution made by political and economic factors. The TUC argues that, since it opened in 1998, its Organising Academy has trained around 150 new organisers who have, working with representatives on the ground, signed up 30,000 new members. The TUC has also launched a new website called work SMART which acts as a comprehensive information system on rights at work as well as a recruitment tool for potential members.

Mandy McDowall, whose place on the TUC Organising Academy was sponsored by the civil and public services union PCS, explains how, in order to be successful, organisers need to

strengthen existing union organisation in the workplace. “I used the skills learnt on the Academy to motivate poorly-organised branches into setting up organising committees. We were so successful that in one Inland Revenue (tax) branch in particular we were able to recruit 360 new members in my first year. I also used my skills when approaching organising campaigns in greenfield sites...where we had to start from scratch.” (1)

Not surprisingly, the recruitment of youthful organisers into established union structures often causes friction. The tension between young men and women who “just want to get the job done” and older activists with years of experience has provoked debate within trade unions about the best approaches for reviving trade unions. Pablo Godoy, a young Canadian activist trained through the CLC’s Solidarity Works! Programme, describes in a recent interview (2) how he “regards the union movement with cautious loyalty.” Impressed by the hard work of people working within the labour movement, he is also disappointed to see inequality, “when movements are especially sensitive to the inequity that exists in the world, they remain blissfully unaware of the injustices in their own work.”

THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

Whilst few trade unions have the resources to establish organising schools, many find other ways of building up the organising capacity of the union. Lead officials in trade unions and shop stewards on the ground are mounting campaigns to organise workers in growing economic sectors like the informal economy and Export Processing Zones, where trade unions are largely absent.

The vast majority of the world’s young people work in the informal economy. In India more than 90 per cent of women who are not employed in agriculture work in the informal economy. In Africa, 93 per cent of all new jobs are informal and unprotected. (3) Employment in the informal sector is growing rapidly, and the young unemployed are increasingly forced to find work in small unregistered companies, for family businesses or in home working or self-employment.

Individual unions have set up specific initiatives designed to organise workers in the informal economy. Hakeima Ahmad Al-Rukhmiu, head of the women’s section of the Yemeni trade union, the GFWTUY, describes how her

ICFTU Youth Organising Award

The ICFTU has launched an award for youth organising. The Youth Organising Award will be presented to a trade union that has achieved outstanding success in organising young workers. The ICFTU hopes the award will highlight best practice in organising young workers, and encourage more trade unions to adopt successful campaign strategies aimed at young people. All ICFTU affiliates are eligible for the award. To receive an application form and information on the criteria, contact Yvonne O’Callaghan, tel. +32 224 0328 or e-mail yvonne.o’callaghan@icftu.org The deadline for submission of entries is 31st September 2005. Nominations will be judged by a sub-group of the ICFTU Youth Committee and the winner announced on 1st December 2005.

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union has set up committees focused entirely on women in the informal economy. The committees organise initiatives to raise women's awareness of their rights and to articulate their needs. "Based on the demands they formulate, we help them, for example, to better organise the production and marketing of their handicrafts. This has proved to be a very successful way of motivating them to unionise."

In Burkina Faso, women market traders are gaining financial security and independence from a business scheme run by the national trade union ONSL. The Women's Literacy and Small Business Centre in Ouagadougou offers training and business advice, as well as shared equipment, to self-employed women working in weaving, embroidery and soap production. Two cooperatives and a bank credit scheme and cereal bank have boosted the financial security of the women, and hundreds of women have joined the union since the centre opened.

In Europe trade unions are also responding to the challenge of the informal economy. The Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina is still struggling to rebuild itself from the bloody conflict of 1992-95. With over half the working population unemployed, the Bosnian trade union confederation SSSBiH has an uphill task in organising young people. Lejla Causevic, who works in the youth department, describes how her union attempts to capture young people before they enter the labour market. The confederation runs a project to improve the employability of university students. "We teach them how to write



projects, business plans. Then we teach them about management, law and labour law. Til now, we had a lot of luck, there were a few who really opened their small business."

EXPORT PROCESSING ZONES

Trade unions are becoming more astute at organising the informal economy but organising workers in the world's Export Processing Zones is infamously more difficult. The zones, employing just under 42 million people worldwide, have become important instruments of economic policy in many

countries. Governments attract investors with financial incentives and a liberal regulatory environment, in return for employment creation and export earnings. Workers in the zones are mainly young unmarried women aged 18 to 25. The poor conditions, employers' hostility to trade unions and the fragility of investment in the zones make it very difficult for trade unions to gain a foothold.

Employers regularly use the threat of dismissal to control the workforce. Few workers in the zones have long-term employment contracts. Short-term contracts are used for flexible hiring and firing and for avoiding costs such as maternity and redundancy pay. In some zones, workers live in a climate of insecurity and fear because they are employed on consecutive short-term contracts of between 28 days and three months. Short-term contracts enable employers to wield the threat of dismissal when the workforce engages in union activity.

Nonetheless, examples of successful union activity in the zones occasionally come to light. The agreement at the Corazón Apparel factory in the maquila in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, demonstrates the power of international trade union solidarity, and the relentless commitment of the team of organisers from global textiles union, the ITGLWF.

Solidarity WORKS!

Solidarity WORKS! is a joint program of the Canadian Labour Congress and Federations of Labour. It is a three-week paid training program focusing on labour education and activist skill development for young workers 26 years old and younger.

In the first week of the program, young workers gather in a retreat-like educational setting to discuss topics and learn skills dealing with:

- rights in the workplace
- social justice history in Canada
- anti-oppressive organizing for unions and in the community
- economics and the impacts of

corporate globalization

The workshop material is developed using popular education principles and techniques. Participants also spend about two weeks in placements with unions and social justice organizations in the community.

Since the summer of 1999, over 170 young workers have participated in the program which is now running in Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, and Vancouver. Many young workers who have been a part of Solidarity WORKS! have gone on to create radical change in unions, workplaces and in their communities.

For more information, see www.clc-ctc.ca

COALITION BUILDING

Unions need power to be effective. Many unions, particularly those operating in hostile political climates, have formed coalitions with campaigning groups and popular movements in order to strengthen their power base.

Plenty of examples come from the

clothing sector where trade unions have joined forces with social justice NGOs to deplore the sweatshop conditions of textiles workers in developing countries. Exploiting the power of consumers and using the internet as a tool, these alliances have been successful in shaming household name firms like Nike and Liz Claiborne into taking more responsibility for labour standards in supplier firms.

Playfair at the Olympics is a recent example of how international solidarity can put pressure on multinationals to clean up their act. The campaign, backed by Oxfam, the Clean Clothes Campaign and Global Unions, staged a number of actions in 2004 to highlight the appalling working conditions experienced by hundreds of thousands of workers in the sportswear industry.

A British academic Professor John Kelly, in a recent paper (4) highlights the power of coalitions in fighting local campaigns. In cities throughout the US a coalition of unions, labour councils, religious organisations and community groups have been successful in increasing wages amongst the low paid through the living wage campaign. The



campaign, which began in Baltimore in 1994, sets out to improve the wages and conditions of workers employed by companies who win large contracts

with city councils (local authorities). The unions win support from local groups by framing their demands in terms of social justice.

There are many more examples to illustrate how the extensive and multi-faceted structures of trade unions are the source of immense strength. Trade unions have the potential to construct powerful local, national, regional, global and sectoral alliances with other trade unions and with non-labour organisations. Trade unions' work on HIV/AIDS in Africa is just one example of how trade unions can ignore traditional lines of demarcation and collaborate across sectoral and geographical borders. What could be a more appropriate response to the challenge of globalisation? ●

1 Quoted on TUC website www.tuc.org.uk

2 Case study by Njeri-Damali Campbell published on CLC website www.clc-cta.ca

3 Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising, WIEGO. 2001

4 Union Revival – Organising around the world. John Kelly. TUC. 2002

Yvonne O'Callaghan **ICFTU Youth Coordinator**



Before joining the ICFTU in 2001, Yvonne worked as a nurse in Ireland. She also found time to be an energetic member of her union, the Irish Nurses' Organisation. "As a student nurse, I was an active member of the student section of the union, and I was very involved in the union and the strikes that were going on

at the time. I was Vice-President of the student section and also a member of the national centre's youth committee."

Yvonne's main role now is to act as secretary to the ICFTU Youth Committee. Her job is to work with members of the committee to make sure that the youth voice is heard within the international youth scene. Her particular concerns are that decent work and the right to organise top the international policy agenda.

The ICFTU Youth Committee is the ICFTU's formal structure for pushing youth issues within the ICFTU and is seen as the leading body on youth perspectives on all trade union issues. Originally set up as an advisory body to inform the ICFTU about youth issues, it reached maturity this year when it became part of the ICFTU constitution. Yvonne explains. "Now the Committee is part of the Constitution and youth has increased its representation within the ICFTU and further inte-

grated youth issues at all levels of the organisation."

A typical day for Yvonne involves answering questions from affiliates about child labour, organising and decent work, getting in touch with trade union colleagues as well as employers in trying to push the joint link between the youth perspective and decent work at national, regional and international level (with a specific focus on the work of the World Bank and the ILO).

For trade unions, the ILC theme "youth employment" could not be more welcome. Yvonne hopes that many more trade unions will get on top of the issues. "Unions need to engage with employers and governments and have concrete strategies through social dialogue to tackle the issue of youth employment and poverty eradication. They should push the decent work agenda for all workers – particularly where young people make up the majority of the workforce as in the Middle East and Africa."

VOICES OF TRADE UNION YOUTH

Reaching out to workers on Palestinian radio

Portrait of Nareman Ibrahim Farag Allah who is in charge of the PGFTU's radio programmes.

Nareman Ibrahim Farag Allah is 26 years old. She has two university degrees, in plastic arts and audio-visual techniques, and has been directing the PGFTU radio programme "The voice of Palestinian workers" for one year now. Since 2002 this trade union radio station has been broadcasting throughout the Gaza Strip, with programmes on issues as diverse as labour law; the political, economic and social situation; religion; health or changing customs. "The major economic crisis we've faced since September 2000 has, in practice, forced women to contribute to the household finances", she explains. "So there are now more and more women working like me. This revolution is bound to change the way society sees us, I'm sure of that."

Along with her 13 brothers and sisters, with whom she grew up in the El Burej refugee camp in the central part of the Gaza Strip, Nareman has always appreciated the importance of education: "education and getting a job, with or without children", as she puts it. "We are half of society, more than half in fact if you discount all those men - young and



Photo M.H.

not so young - who are now imprisoned, injured or have died in Palestine. Tomorrow's society can't do without us: we have our place in it but need to assert it".

When asked about the impact of such social upheavals on the family, Nareman is cautious: "It will take time. But many serious questions are already being raised and provoking debates in the women's programmes we broadcast. Palestinian men are expected to be the breadwinners, for instance. So what will happen when their wives and partners are earning their living? Will the women agree to share their earnings with the household, or what will happen?" She tells us it's too

early to know. "One thing is certain though: one wage is no longer enough. So things are going to change. And in my generation it is already noticeable that many more men are looking for women who can potentially contribute to the household finances".

WOMEN WORKERS STILL IN A SMALL MINORITY

In Gaza, women still occupy a marginal position on the labour market, with barely 20% of them working. Nareman Ibrahim Farag Allah found her own job after several months on the dole and thanks to an "assisted" job scheme run jointly by the Ministry of Finance and the national trade union confederation. She got what she wanted: a skilled job in a field that she loves and a chance to indulge her passion for providing information and education over the airwaves to tens of thousands of workers.

Nevertheless, she admits that her main hope at the moment is to emigrate. She would like to go to Dubai, like one of her sisters, and build a better life than the one she could hope for here, with better prospects in the relative Eldorado of the Gulf than she could expect in the "prison" of the Gaza Strip. "My parents agree. I hope I can leave. But I'll come back: that's for sure." ●

INTERVIEW BY MARTINE HASSOUN

"I used to think unions belonged to the past!"

Yasuyuki Kaneko works as Youth Coordinator at the Japanese trade union confederation RENGO. He led a delegation of young Japanese to the ICFTU's Congress in Miyazaki in December.

● Why did you join a trade union?

When I was ready to graduate from university, I wanted to work either for a non-government association or a think tank. But in 1995, after the burst of the Japanese bubble, this was kind of an ice age for any job seeker. It was really difficult for anyone who graduated to find a nice job in a desired company. So I happened to see the

"wanted" ad of RENGO and went to the interview without knowing what RENGO is all about. Of course I was taught about the labour union movement in my school days, but I thought that it's an issue of the past and that the labour movement was finished in the past!

● Are there specific problems for young workers in Japan?

We are very much concerned about our future when we are old because the Government is trying to reform the pension system. Our society is rapidly ageing and has a low birth rate. When I get old, I know that the number of younger workers who will be supporting elderly people like us will be diminished greatly.

● How are young people represented within RENGO?

There was a Youth Committee in RENGO but in 1995 when the organisation was reformed, the Youth Committee was merged into the Organising Committee, so the Youth Committee itself disappeared. The reason for this, according to the opinion of the affiliates, was that the youth activities should be implemented at the local level, not at the headquarter level.

But everybody was now saying youth was the responsibility of someone else. So, nobody was accountable for the youth activities.

Different people started to raise their voices and requested that youth activities be cen-

tralised at the RENGO headquarters. This request was started by the younger members of RENGO, but gradually senior leaders of the Rengo HQ started to understand the importance of youth as well as women. RENGO dispatched delegations to the European nations in order to learn from their youth activities. A delegation went to Sweden, the ICFTU and the UK. After, we set up the Youth Activities Project in 2002. We are really determined to take more initiatives by ourselves, without depending on senior members.

● How do the young Japanese view the trade unions?

I think the activities of the labour unions are very invisible, so young people don't know what kind of activities they are engaged in and what kinds of benefits are generated from these activities.

And - maybe this is unique to Japan - but in Japan there are many unions that are based on individual companies. There is a law in Japan that within companies all the workers are treated the same way. So you have some workers who work very hard in order to improve their working conditions, and the advantages are provided to all. So



the non-members say "great, I don't have to do anything". That kind of thinking is very prevalent in Japan. Now some young trade union members begin to say "maybe

we don't need a trade union".

● What can you do to improve your message to young people?

We have to utilise the Youth Activity Project. The members of the projects are the representatives of the industrial labour union federation and local RENGOs. They have to be responsible for mobilising the young workers there. In this way, we could create some synergy - a chain reaction effect. We can start these activities as soon as we come back to our home towns. The other young members who attended the World Congress were so impressed. Every night we went together drinking some alcohol until late in the night, and we are so determined to start these activities as soon as we go home.

● What were your young members' impressions of Congress?

We are very surprised to know that the rest of the world's countries are facing the similar kinds of problems when it comes to the youth issues. So we realised that Japan is not living in a vacuum - we are part of the world. ●

INTERVIEW BY **SAMUEL GRUMIAU**

"Young people need a voice"

Amarsanaa Enebish is the Officer for External Relations at the Confederation of Mongolian Trade Unions and a member of the ICFTU Youth Committee.

● What are the main issues facing the young people that you represent?

The main problem is unemployment. The unemployment rate is very high in Mongolia and in the region. Those young people who cannot find a job just do nothing. They depend on their parents. There are job opportunities for young people but the job qualification requirement is quite high. You have to be well educated and well skilled. You also have to be very motivated. So many young people cannot meet those requirements and cannot get a job.

● What kind of sectors do young people work in?

Many young people work in the high tech IT sector. For young people with high tech skills it is very easy to find jobs in Mongolia. Others work in banking, tourism, restaurants and bars. These are diverse sectors, but there are common problems. The first problem is that young people starting work need to update their education and



skills but training opportunities are not available at work. Also, these young people earn very low salaries. The first to enter jobs are also the first to be retrenched.

● What proportion of young people are trade union members?

We have about 250,000 people in trade union membership in Mongolia. Forty-six

per cent of our membership is young people aged under 35. This is quite high but it reflects the nature of the workforce - 57 per cent of the workforce are aged under 35. The problem for us is that, despite membership being so high, there is a very low participation rate by young people in trade unions. When people start work they automatically become members of trade unions, but they often do not know that they are trade union members.

● So what are you doing at the Confederation to encourage young people to be more active in their unions?

The trade union movement needs to strengthen the youth voice in participating in decision-making. Due to the lack of active participation by young people, the federations belong to older people and the young people do not benefit. First of all, we need to establish the youth structures. At the confederation level we already have a youth committee, known as the National Trade Union Centre Youth Committee, but at lower levels - company level or industrial sector level - we do not have such structures. We recommend that the industrial federations set up these youth structures. Once they have this kind of structure, we can work very actively with them. ●

INTERVIEW BY **SARAH PERMAN**

"We are at the forefront of the fight for democracy"

Yemisi Ilesanmi is Gender Officer and Executive Assistant to the President of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), and a member of the ICFTU Youth Committee.

● How did you first get involved with the Nigeria Labour Congress?

I had been working on youth issues within the labour movement because I used to be a student activist in the university. I was on the National Association of Nigerian Students. I was a student leader and I founded the National Association of Nigerian Female Students. I was asked to work for the Nigeria Labour Congress because of my involvement in youth and my student activism. At that time there was no gender office and, because I had founded the National Association of Female Students, I said that I could do the same for the workers. So I pioneered the gender work of the Nigeria Labour Congress.

● Are the youth issues that you are dealing with now similar to those you took up when you were a student activist?

Well yes, because the student movement is volatile politically and you find that our issues are not limited to student issues. Youth issues are wider economic, social and political issues. Look at democracy. At the university, we were fighting for democracy in the country and the students were at the forefront of the fight for democracy and they were out on the streets. They weren't just interested in school fees or other education issues. So when I came into the unions I found that there too



we were dealing with a broader aspect to issues. The country looks to labour to give the guiding light.

● What are the main issues facing young people in work in Nigeria?

This is a very sad situation because there is such widespread unemployment in Nigeria. I am lucky to find work as a full time trade unionist but there are so many young people who would be very useful in the labour force but they cannot find jobs.

Also, the unions don't think about encouraging youth participation in union work. Even if there are unions in the workplace, there is an established caucus already. And young people wonder what these old people are doing in all these meetings and by the time they start asking questions they are cut off. Actu-

ally, young people are really short-changed.

● In what ways are you trying to change that in your job?

Like I said, I am a gender person. Women and youth issues go hand in hand because we have similar problems. I am trying to tell young people in my organisation that we can't just sit down and allow these old people to just ride rough shod over us. Luckily I have a President right now who is encouraging the youth work. The same cannot be said of other affiliated trade unions. The unions did not want to accept the gender policies we developed but because we were able to get the President's support the policy was implemented by all the affiliated unions. At the National Delegates' Conference we voted, we lobbied, and it was signed. And I think that we can do the same with youth policy in the Nigeria Labour Congress.

● What is your youth policy calling for?

In our gender equity policy we had affirmative action for women. I think we should start looking at that for youth. I think that affirmative action is very, very important if you want the youth to move forward. We should also address unemployment and job creation. We should talk about the education young people get to prepare them for work. We should make a conscious effort to reach out to and organise youth in the informal economy. We have alliances and networking in the informal economy. But we mustn't just have networking - we must be able to make these people members of our trade unions. ●

INTERVIEW BY SARAH PERMAN

"Education is our number one concern"

Hakeima Ahmad Al-Rukhmiu, aged 32, works as a medical assistant and specialises in assisting with childbirth. She also heads the women's section of her union - the GFW-TUY in Yemen. She insists on the importance of education programmes in the fight to eradicate poverty and emancipate women.

● What is the situation of women working in the health sector in Yemen?

They face a great deal of discrimination. Pay inequalities are common, and when it comes to promotions, men are given priority. Even the women who are highly qualified come up



against obstacles. It's the same in trade unions, although now, thanks to our efforts to raise awareness and to make men understand that women are just as capable, we have managed to get 35 women elected as trade union leaders in my region, to represent the 1,500 women union members here.

● How did you get involved in trade union activities?

I have been a member of the health sector union since 1992. Two years ago, thanks to the first elections held in the union (previously the posts were allocated by appointment), I was elected as the head of the women's section, a position I was re-elected to a few months ago. From 1992 to 1997, I participated in setting up an education programme funded by our national union, offering training in the area of health to Yemeni

women as a way to strengthen the situation of women in our country. Along with the diploma they obtain at the end of the education programme, the women also receive an assurance from the government that they will find a job.

● What are the main obstacles to higher rates of women's participation in the labour market and trade unions?

The basic problem is the level of education, which is really very low. The rate of illiteracy among women is terrible (over 70% in rural areas). The extreme poverty makes access to education difficult for the girls from the less developed regions. They are also constrained by traditional and conservative attitudes. Education is really our number one concern. In 2003 and 2004, we organised nine seminars - with the support of aid organisations

- to develop the occupational skills of men and women in a whole range of sectors.

The immense poverty is also at the root of child labour, which is a very widespread problem in Yemen. Children are sometimes employed to do very dangerous work, such as handling hazardous chemicals, for example. Some are also the victims of child traffickers who take them to Saudi Arabia, where they are subjected to all kinds of abuse.

To come back to the place of women in society, we are starting to see some positive developments. There are more women getting involved, for example, in politics, although they are still a very small minority. Out of the three million women in Yemen there is only one female minister!

● In practical terms, how do the women

manage to take part in trade union activities at the same time as fulfilling their family responsibilities?

I am widow, I only have one little girl, so it's not so difficult for me to meet my trade union responsibilities alongside my work and family responsibilities. But it's true that for many women it is very difficult. That's why we hold our workshops during the afternoon, as it's easier for the women to organise themselves to do their work in the morning. It's vital that we take on board the constraints on women, to make it as easy as possible for them to take part. Many of them have to organise things well in advance so that they can come; they prepare for our meetings as if they were going to a party. ●

INTERVIEW BY NATACHA DAVID

"Industry is almost dead and unemployment sky high"

Aleksandra Vitorovic is President of the Youth Section of the trade union confederation Nezavisnost (Serbia) and coordinator of the ICFTU youth network for the South East Europe region. Aleksandra's main concern is rocketing unemployment among young people.

● What issues unite the trade union confederations in your region?

We have a lot in common actually. We have nine union confederations in the network from Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro. Most of these countries are the former republics of Yugoslavia and we are dealing with almost the same problems. The main issue is unemployment because these countries are in the process of transition. Because of war, bombings and sanctions, industry is almost dead in these countries so a lot of people remain without work. This means that there are a lot of young people who are desperately searching for a job but there is no work.

Faced with this situation young people have to accept any kind of job that society can offer. And if they cannot find a regular job they are going to accept work in the informal economy. This means they have no rights, no social security, no agreements, no collective bargaining nor the possibility of being a member of a trade union. It is really hard to recruit and organise these young people.

● How do you go about trying to organise these young people?



They remain potential members only. In Serbia we have almost a million people who are unemployed. This is really a huge number because Serbia is not a big country (Serbia and Montenegro's population is 10.5 million). The labour law says that the trade unions can recruit and organise employed people not workers. This means they cannot touch those who are unemployed, those working in the informal economy, nor pensioners. We need to change the labour laws of Serbia and we still do not have a good trade union law.

● Is the government receptive to the idea of increasing trade union rights?

Right now we have to wait and see because the government is so new. But we hope that relations with trade unions won't just be on paper but will involve real social dialogue. The fact that so many people are working in the informal economy is not just a problem for trade unions but is also a major issue for the government because these workers do not pay taxes and don't contribute to the national budget. It's also a problem for employers. The representatives of the employers' organi-

sations say that the competition for workers is unfair because workers in the informal economy get more money than those who are paying taxes.

● What are your relations like with the government?

We have three trade union confederations in Serbia: the old one which was connected to the former government of Slobodan Milosevic, a new one which is connected to the new government, and my confederation Nezavisnost. Nezavisnost is the main one and, true to its name, is independent. We are really trying to act like an independent trade union and protect the rights and interests of the workers. It doesn't matter who is running the country. We have to be involved in the political process so that we can try to change laws. It is the only way that we can do it.

● Is the ICFTU youth network in your region a "virtual" network or do you meet face-to-face?

The network is organised very well geographically. All the members from the former Yugoslavia use the same language. We only have one language problem because we have people from Albania and Kosovo.

We got together recently five times during one year. Our problem is that there is no actual budget at the regional level of the ICFTU so it is always hard to meet. We have our own internet site and this is really important - not just for us but for potential members and for NGOs who are dealing with the same problems and with whom we have good cooperation. It is really important to let them see that we exist and to make them aware of the actions we are taking. ●

INTERVIEW BY SARAH PERMAN

Taking action on HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects young people. The epidemic is also robbing young people of basic education and the opportunity for productive work. Young trade unionists around the world are at the forefront of workplace responses to HIV/AIDS.

AIDS is a global humanitarian disaster. The epidemic killed more than 3 million people in 2004, including half a million children. At the end of 2004, nearly 40 million people were living with HIV and an estimated 4.9 million people were newly infected with the virus.

The global epidemic is also a major threat to sustainable development. Rates of infection are highest in some of the world's poorest countries. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where HIV infections have assumed devastating proportions, health services lack the capacity for an adequate response. Whole populations are facing reduced life expectancy and increased poverty. Decades of economic and social progress are being reversed because of the ravages of the disease.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

Despite increased funding, higher political commitment and growing recognition of the impact of HIV/AIDS, the scale of the epidemic has so far outstripped the response. The most devastating impact of HIV/AIDS is on young people. An estimated 10 million young people were living with HIV/AIDS at the end of 2003, many of them women. Young people aged 15 to 24 year account for nearly half of all new infections. AIDS is among the top causes of death for children aged under five, and there are nearly 15 million AIDS orphans worldwide.

HIV/AIDS is reducing opportunities for young people to go to school or work. Young people are forced to drop out of school to care for sick parents and younger siblings. In addition, young people, living in households where their parents have died or are too sick to work, are forced into work to supplement the family income. In many countries, the premature death of parents is also preventing young people from acquiring the knowledge and skills that are normally passed down from generation to generation and that young adults need for economic survival.

According to UNAIDS, the most important challenges today also include:

- the female face of the epidemic –

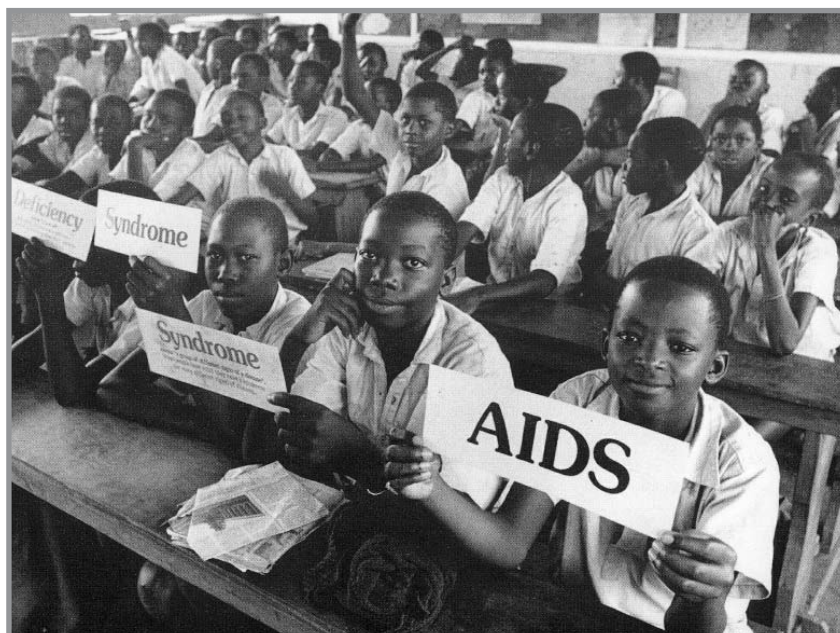


Photo: FUNUAP

AIDS is affecting increasing numbers of women and girls. In some countries in Southern Africa, young women are three times more likely to be infected than young men. Women and girls are more likely to carry the burden of care for the sick.

- improving access to antiretroviral treatment – only 7% of people in developing countries who need antiretrovirals have access to ARVs.
- increasing prevention programmes to prevent HIV transmission, for example mother-to-child transmission.
- tackling stigma and discrimination – prejudice increases people's vulnerability to HIV and prevents marginalised groups receiving the care they need.
- supporting AIDS orphans – in Sub-Saharan Africa an estimated 12 million children have lost one or both parents to the disease. Often these children are left with little support.

A YOUTH ISSUE

With young people making up nearly half of all new HIV infections, the future course of the epidemic will be determined by whether prevention efforts reach young people and whether treatment gets to the affected. Trade unions have an important role in ensuring that their work on HIV/AIDS reaches young people, even where young people do not reflect the profile of the union's membership.

As activists and campaigners, young people have the potential to drive the struggle against HIV/AIDS. Young trade unionists have shown from their successes in organising and in fighting attacks on their rights that they know best how

to communicate and work with young people. Young workers have the ability to drive change within unions by demanding that sensitive and difficult issues like HIV/AIDS move up the agenda and are tackled in innovative ways.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan recognised the significance of young people's fight against HIV/AIDS in a recent statement: "Where politicians fail to act, young people continually demonstrate the leadership and integrity needed to put AIDS on the agenda. While many adults seek the refuge of denial, young people have the courage to face the issue head-on. They are the ones who know best how to communicate and join together in a common cause."

A WORKPLACE ISSUE

Because of the extreme economic and social threat posed by the epidemic, some trade unions have been active in developing a workplace response. Shortages of skills and labour, the devastating impact on households, threats to economic productivity and the loss of their own members have galvanised trade unions into action.

These trade unionists have been quick to recognise that the workplace is an ideal environment for efforts aimed at prevention, treatment, care and support.

Much of the focus has been on protecting workers through workplace policies and collective agreements. Trade unions use the ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work as the basis. The Code includes important provisions on prevention, non-discrimination and employment security for people living with HIV/AIDS.

Education and information aimed at increasing awareness and generating behaviour change has been the focus of many workplace programmes. These projects play to unions' strengths: their proximity to their members and their skills in peer education programmes.

Trade unions in Uganda have targeted prevention activities at the informal economy. High levels of poverty and illiteracy in the agricultural sector led one union, the International Food Workers' Union (IUF) to use drama as the basis for its AIDS work. Their focus has been on plantations where workers' camps are conducive both to the spread and prevention of the disease. Omara Amuko from the IUF in Uganda explains, "Plantation workers are especially vulnerable. They live together in labour camps where the conditions mean that HIV can be easily spread. One camp can have as many as 1,000 families. Poverty levels are very high. Prostitution is a problem. They are a very vulnerable group."

Transport unions have taken a similar approach. Distributing condoms and using drama, Romano Ochieng attempts to create behaviour change among the transport workers he represents in Uganda. As HIV coordinator for global transport union ITF, he has been working since 1999 among two high-risk groups: long distance truck drivers and sex workers at the truck stops. Romano is clear that the survival of the union was the imperative for action. "Many unions became worried about their workers and their members. We were worried about

the unions not existing any more."

Care and treatment programmes have also been the basis for union responses. Global union ICEM, the federation for the energy and mining sectors, recently launched an ambitious programme to set up health clinics in mining companies that will provide basic healthcare and access to ARVs for workers, their families and the communities around the major worksites. Reg Green, ICEM Health and Safety Officer, explains how it will work, "We have said that we could make it worthwhile by establishing clinics at workplace level. The problem in many of these places is that the medical infrastructure is not there. The danger with providing ARVs without that infrastructure is that you can create resistance to treatment. In rural areas, where many of our members are based, there is even less chance of there being a proper infrastructure."

In the Philippines, trade unions have a long-established role in HIV projects. In addition to its peer education programmes, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines supports a network of 14 health clinics which provide reproductive health care and services, including advice on HIV/AIDS. To date, close to 200,000 workers and their families have benefited from the programme.

The Global Unions recently carried out a "Mapping Exercise" to identify the range of trade union responses to the HIV epidemic. The result showed an impressive range of activity. It demonstrat-

ed the potential for the labour movement to fight the epidemic by exploiting its global and sectoral structures and tapping into unions' unrivalled access to their members. By forging global, sectoral or national alliances, trade unions are in a unique position to respond to the AIDS epidemic.

The report also showed the constraints trade unions face: lack of resources, problems with capacity and a high turnover of members to name but a few. The challenge for many trade unions is turning a one-off project or seminar into regular work embedded in the culture of the union.

Nonetheless, the potential for a major contribution to HIV/AIDS is there. Clementine Dehwe, Global Unions HIV/AIDS Coordinator based in Brussels, is clear that all trade unions should take up this issue: "HIV and AIDS is a trade union issue because it affects people aged 15-49, that is the working class who are also trade union members. Our members are either infected or affected by HIV and AIDS. The unions serve to protect the interest of their members. HIV and AIDS is a human rights issue and human rights are also trade union rights." ●

References: The ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS 2004 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic. UNAIDS AIDS Epidemic Update. December 2004. UNAIDS Global Unions HIV/AIDS Mapping Exercise. 2004.

"What will happen to our country?"

Bongi Ndlovu works for the South African confederation FEDUSA where she is responsible for youth. On a recent visit to Brussels, where Bongi was attending a meeting of the ICFTU Youth Committee, she talked about FEDUSA's work on HIV/AIDS.

"South Africa as a country has a problem: HIV/AIDS is affecting everyone but youth especially because they have to mother their brothers and sisters at age 16 and cannot stay at school. The South African trade union confederations (COSATU, FEDUSA and NACTU) have joined hands, with the support of the American Solidarity Center. They have funded a campaign to try and train young workers who are in the trade union

movement to deal with HIV/AIDS. The campaign also covers trade union leadership skills so young people can bargain collectively and can negotiate on trade union issues, as well as HIV/AIDS concerns like counselling and testing. "Attitudes are changing. At the beginning – maybe three years back – we had a major problem. The moment someone at work heard that you had HIV/AIDS you faced discrimination. Since then FEDUSA has been training shop stewards so that they can talk to employers about how to tackle HIV/AIDS issues. We also have to train the employees – it's not only the employers who discriminate. Employees often think that people with HIV/AIDS are dying and they make life difficult. So we train three groups: employers, employees and shop stewards in how to prevent

HIV and how to deal with it. "The training has been welcomed by all the groups. People are now free to go out there and be tested voluntarily because they know they are not going to be discriminated against. People are more sensitive. They are aware of the issues now. "HIV/AIDS is having a tremendous impact on the whole economy. It is killing young people in South Africa, and you find the economy as whole is suffering because so many people are dying. Children are left without parents. They cannot go to school. You say that the youth is the future but that youth is not being taken care of. This problem is going to cripple the economy. If the youth are not there, what is going to happen to the future of the country?"

Make poverty history

Hundreds of youth organisations and trade unions around the world are organising mass campaign actions in 2005 which call on world leaders to do much more to end poverty.

The campaign – known as the Global Call to Action against Poverty or, in some countries, Make Poverty History – is a world-wide coalition of organisations who are committed to forcing world leaders to live up to their promises, and to making a breakthrough on poverty in 2005.

The Global Call to Action is an alliance of NGOs, international networks, trade unions, religious groups and other civil society organisations who have agreed to undertake joint action and mobilisation at key times in 2005. They plan to link actions symbolically by the wearing of a white band.

The coalition is made up of different groups with different policies. They are united in demanding trade justice, debt cancellation, an increase in aid, and national efforts to reduce poverty.

THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

A major focus for the campaign is the Millennium Development Goals. The eight Millennium Goals, which governments signed up to at the UN in September 2000, promised to lift millions of people out of desperate poverty. The goals are a unique opportunity for governments to take real action on poverty. Though they will not end poverty, achieving them would be an important step towards reducing extreme poverty, hunger and ill health.

Poor countries are expected to take the main responsibility for achieving the goals through more effective governance, greater accountability to citizens and a more efficient use of resources. But the goals recognise that poor countries cannot do it alone. Rich countries must fulfil their end of the bargain – and deliver aid, debt relief and fair trade.

Achieving the goals is possible. The UN Millennium Project, an independent advisory body headed by Professor Jeffrey Sachs, has argued that world poverty could be cut by half in the coming decade. Recognising the hurdles to attaining this ambition, a recent (1) report set out an operational framework that would allow even the poorest countries to achieve the Millennium Goals by 2015. The report said, “The practical solutions exist. The political framework is established. And for the first time, the



cost is utterly affordable.....All that is needed is action.”

However, progress towards the goals has been disappointingly slow. The education target for 2005 has already been missed. In sub-Saharan Africa and western Asia, the number of people living in extreme poverty has actually increased since 1990.

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT: CRITICAL

Youth employment is not one of the eight Millennium goals. However, there is a target on youth unemployment and it is recognised that creating quality employment for young people will be a key contribution to achieving all the goals.

Unemployment is only one problem faced by young people. A large proportion of young people are underemployed. Many young people can only find work which is temporary, insecure and even dangerous. Many work excessive hours, for low pay and in poor conditions where there are few rights, social benefits or trade union protection.

Trade unions must act now to ensure that action on the Millennium Goals makes decent work for young people a priority.

THE 2005 CALL TO ACTION

Under the Global Call to Action Against Poverty, hundreds of youth organisations are driving a massive campaign to promote the Millennium Goals in 2005. They will organise global actions at key times in 2005 and link their actions symbolically by the wearing of a white band. Key dates include the G8 Summit in Scotland in July, the UN Millennium Goals Summit in September, and the World Trade Organisation's Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong in December.

Many organisations have already launched campaigns promoting the Millennium Goals at national and local level. Trade unions have joined forces with other groups in Global Call to Action Against Poverty committees which coordinate national campaign strategies and actions.

In the UK in February, Nelson Mandela issued a rallying cry to “make poverty history” in front of over 22,000 people in Trafalgar Square. Speaking ahead of his meeting with G7 leaders, and wearing a white band throughout his address, Mr. Mandela said: “Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings.”

To get involved with the national campaign in your country, contact your national trade union centre, the ICFTU or your global union confederation.

You can link up with the international coalition by going to their website www.whiteband.org ●

(1) Investing in Development. A practical plan to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. The UN Millennium Project. New York 2005.

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